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# Odyssey of a Soviet Army Defector

By FREDERICK KEMPE

VIENNA—Aleksandr's odyssey began the night that a drunken Soviet lieutenant ordered him to scrub the company's grisly toilets with a toothbrush. The 18-year-old Soviet soldier, fed up with the ill-treatment he received at his duty station in Poland, told his superior to go to hell.

Unfortunately, the insulted officer was sober enough to ship the private off to a month of forced labor on a "punishment brigade." His work was punctuated by post-breakfast and pre-dinner beatings; two smiling sergeants in a windowless room would throw him on the floor and kick him while shouting that he would learn "how to talk to officers."

Aleksandr, or Sasha as his friends know him, landed in a hospital after his month's punishment with a badly swollen stomach and damaged internal organs. He despaired when the doctor refused to send him home for treatment, and decided he must escape. After returning to duty, he took advantage of a day off granted for a medical checkup. He hid in a courtyard until nightfall, then leaped over a wall and began 3½ years of hiding before being smuggled to Western Europe a little more than a month ago by underground Solidarity, the subterranean remains of the social movement crushed by martial law in December 1981.

"I was afraid that I would curse an officer again sometime, and I never would have survived another month of punishment," he frowns. "I knew the risk of capture would be 10 or 15 years in a labor camp, or perhaps even death, but I saw no other choice."

## The Experiences of Sasha

Sasha's whereabouts in Western Europe and his last name must remain secret for now, as must details about his escape to the West. The Solidarity underground is still using the channel for other purposes. Large chunks of his story and some of its minor details have been confirmed by sources in Poland and through other reliable means so as to leave little doubt about its truth. He misses his parents and friends in the Soviet Union, but does not believe he will follow the example of the two Soviet Army defectors who left Britain last year to return to their homeland.

Sasha, stocky and wearing a thick black beard, talks about his experiences in simple Russian, spiced with occasional Polish words to describe concepts and books he has never discussed in his own language: Solidarity, underground opposition and the books he first read while in hiding—Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's "Cancer Ward" and "Gulag Archipelago."

As the first known Soviet military defector in Poland (there have been several

in Afghanistan), Sasha tells a unique tale; spanning six months before martial law and 3½ years thereafter. It offers novel insight into the life of a Soviet soldier in a rebellious brother country, and it sheds light on a Polish underground that is too weak to fight authorities but still large and organized enough to hide and smuggle out a Russian fugitive.

His engineers battalion based in Olawe near the Western Polish city of Wroclaw was responsible for building and maintaining airports. He speaks knowledgeably about the construction of underground takeoff strips and camouflaged landing fields in many parts of Poland, covered either by large nets or fake buildings that can be removed quickly.

He speaks of the low morale of ill-fed enlisted Russians who were awakened between 1 and 3 a.m. almost every morning for strike and demonstration alerts. He says it was one of several practices engineered to foment hatred against Poles, psychologically preparing troops to suppress Solidarity, if necessary.

But above all, his time in hiding is a human tale of several hundred Poles risking their safety to provide him jobs, protection, medical attention and even Polish identity papers. He changed locations more than 30 times, usually living in areas where Solidarity was inactive. He stayed in buildings that housed party members, military officers and secret police, where his underground Solidarity friends correctly figured he would be less likely to be drawn in by a police dragnet.

But he was also rejected in his contacts with U.S. officials. He tried to defect at the U.S. Embassy in Warsaw in May 1984. He carried a note giving his history that had been written in English by friends. But a consulate officer told him, "We can't do anything to help you. You must go away."

The U.S. Embassy in Warsaw declined to comment, but one U.S. diplomat muses that he was probably too small a fish for the embassy to risk so much, considering the political problems caused by Cardinal Mindszenty's stay at the U.S. Embassy in Budapest for 15 years until 1971 and five years of housing Pentecostals at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow from 1978 to 1983.

Aleksandr was born on Feb. 18, 1963, in Vornonezh, a medium-sized industrial town in the Soviet Russian Republic, and he was drafted in April 1981 after his 18th birthday. After three weeks of basic training in Tambov, he and other draftees were put on a plane without being told their destination. Their concern increased when leather belts and boots were issued with their uniforms, items given only to troops being shipped abroad.

"Everyone was unhappy and they started drinking," he says. When officers told the men on board the plane that they were bound for Poland, there was initial relief. "But then there was fear because we said that was going to be the next Afghanistan."

His biggest surprises in Poland were the drunkenness of the officers, the lack of troop discipline, and the time spent building up hatred and fear of Poles.

Soldiers technically weren't allowed off base, not even to attend the cinema across the road. They were told the restrictions were to prevent Solidarity agents from killing or kidnapping them. However, lack of discipline allowed many to get out and discover that Solidarity was a larger and more peaceful organization than their officers' lectures indicated. But what they were most interested in was that Poland was a good market: They traded whatever they could find to local Poles for alcohol or such clothing as jeans and T-shirts that they could sell later for a healthy profit in the Soviet Union.

What also distinguished service in Poland was that the soldiers clearly saw themselves as much as troops meant to suppress an ally, Poland, as fight their enemies in the West.

"The officers wanted to make us very aggressive against Solidarity and the Polish people," Aleksandr says. "But we were indifferent to Solidarity, and we hated the officers. There was such a lack of discipline among the soldiers that I have trouble imagining that officers could instill a spirit to fight against the population. The soldiers would have used every possible chance to trade, but not to willingly fight."

The soldiers also resented the officers because they would often sell the battalion's short supplies of butter and meat to Poles. "When meat was served to us it was more often boiled fat and the butter was melted fat," he says.

The arms depot that Aleksandr guarded included the usual bombs and missiles, but also curiously held enough spare AK-47 semiautomatic machine guns and ammunition "for a regiment" and many more hand-to-hand weapons no longer used by the Soviet military and too outdated to be used in a modern war against the West. There were 1,500 to 2,000 AK-47s alone with 180 bullets each. Moscow clearly didn't trust the Polish army too far.

The Poles were always kept short of ammunition and were given old, unreliable equipment. "We would always hear about their tanks breaking down," he says.

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But Aleksandr noticed that despite Poland's economic problems and Soviet propaganda, ordinary people lived better than in the Soviet Union. That led him to assume that the West was even more desirable. The promise of a richer life, his failure to be sent home for health reasons, and his fears about continuing in the Soviet army prompted his defection.

The young soldier spent his first three days of hiding inside a barn, where he lived off animal corn feed and tepid water. When those provisions ran out, he stole a bicycle and rode to nearby Wroclaw.

Polés were taken aback when he approached them, still in his uniform (though with the epaulets and insignia ripped off) and asked in Russian where he could find Solidarity headquarters.

He feared the worst when he walked into the union offices and saw a Polish officer in full uniform, wearing a Solidarity button, also waiting for help. He retreated to the men's room. When a union official walked in, the Soviet soldier answered his small talk in Russian. He asked for asylum over a Solidarity urinal, a scene only slightly less ludicrous than Robin Williams's defection to a Bloomingdale's clerk in the film "Moscow on the Hudson."

The official locked him in a stall until he could decide what to do. He was then moved to a safe house, where Solidarity kept him under wraps for three weeks while they investigated whether he had been planted as a government provocation against the union. When they discovered the Soviet military manhunt under way, they believed his story and took him to Warsaw where he was to appeal to the Swedish Embassy for help.

### Frequent Moves

However, a receptionist there said no one spoke Russian and he should come back with an interpreter. That was Dec. 10, and three days later martial law changed everything. The parents of the Solidarity activist who had been looking after him whisked the soldier away hours before their daughter was arrested.

He regained contact with Solidarity only after four months, and from then on he moved frequently. He worked as a watch repairman, as a gardener and as a tractor driver, and he stayed with people ranging from simple workers to Roman Catholic intellectuals. He learned Polish from television, radio, and the reading of fairy tales and comics, then he moved on to underground publications and Solzhenitsyn.

The underground saw it was growing more dangerous to keep their Russian soldier in Poland, so they sent him to the U.S. Embassy. The consulate officer turned him away, and Sasha rejected his friends' advice to hold his ground until the embassy was forced to take him in.

"I feared that the Marines would come and take me in a jeep and drive me out somewhere and throw me out," he says. "That would have been very bad because then I couldn't find my way back to safety."

So he wandered lost on the streets of Warsaw for several harrowing hours before finding his way back to friends.

Finally at about midnight on the last Sunday of June, underground Solidarity leaders picked him up, and he was on his way to the West. He had no forewarning, but as always simply trusted his Polish protectors who, unlike the U.S. Embassy, had never let him down.

But does he resent the democratic United States for not helping him? "I didn't have any experience of American democracy," he says, "so I couldn't be disappointed in it."

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*Mr. Kempe is the Journal's East European correspondent.*